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ABSTRACT

According to a 1994 analysis of returning students, as many as 43% of all college students are currently over the age of 24. This influx of returning students demands a new look at existing pedagogical practices. The changing demographics of the classroom turn age and life experience into a consideration for pedagogy alongside race, class, and gender. A significant number of returning or first-time registrants are as old or older than the faculty with whom they come to study. One way of recognizing returning students as sites of critical difference lies in the use of a pedagogical tool--the textbook. Textbooks often address the classroom as a homogeneous group and employ language sensitive to age and gender issues, but fail to take into account age differences. Several forthcoming composition textbooks, however, appear promising for use with returning students. Demands placed on students seem magnified for returning students who, because of existing family, work, and employer commitments, need to balance their time and personal resources. Even as returning students must adapt to the requirements of the academy, the academy must adapt to the needs of the significant number of returning students. (Contains seven references.) (CR)

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Carrie A. Marino
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The Student Returns: Challenges of the Returning Student

Let me begin by stating that this talk is intended to present the viewpoint of a returning student--me. As such, it represents one person's personal experience when faced with the challenges of returning to the classroom. For this reason, this talk is subjective, anecdotal, and hopes to create a new appreciation of the returning student in the university classroom. While similarities like the struggle to find study time, an available seat in a crowded class, or the money to buy books, exist between my experience as a returning student and that of a continuing student's, so do differences. And these experiences differ from the beginning. For example, my daughter, a high school senior, receives college brochures weekly and at times, daily. The college brochures, careful works of marketing departments, sent mainly to traditional continuing education students, reflect the students' ages of seventeen, eighteen, or possibly nineteen. Smiling, yet serious faces of attractive young people appear on the covers of these brochures. The only glimpses of people over age twenty-five belong to the professors. These brochures forgot that returning students also inhabit the administrative offices and classrooms of the university.

Assuredly, it makes sense to market your product, in this instance the university, to your primary target audience, but the number of non-traditional students returning to institutions of higher learning increases annually. Deborah Youngman and William Giczkowski use this increase as a concrete reason for developing an appreciation for returning students. According to Youngman's presentation of P. J. O'Connor's 1994 analysis of returning students, "as many as 43 percent of all college students are currently over the age of 24. . ." (Youngman 108). According to Youngman and O'Connor, returning students figure as almost half of the total student population in the United States. This influx of returning students demands a new look at existing pedagogical practices. Can current pedagogical practices satisfy the needs, capabilities, and differences of a multitude of students? Of course, pedagogy attempts to accomplish this

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already, but the changing demographics of the classroom turns age and life experience into a consideration alongside race, class, and gender.

Giczkowski adds that, "An increasing proportion of college students are in their 30's or 40's, many of them returning to finish a college education interrupted by marriage, parental responsibilities, or the need to go to work" (Giczkowski B2). While Giczkowski apparently refers to students who return to school because they need to go to work, not change careers, he reminds me of an anecdote, relayed to me by a colleague, Carlton Floyd, which illustrates the ignor-ance attitudes toward returning students existing in institutions. While teaching in a northwestern college Carlton met a student, an ex-logger, who after breaking both his legs in an work-related accident returned to college to effect a career change. At an orientation held specifically for returning students, the college representative admonished the group, reminding them that they had to manage their money on their own now and that their mothers weren't there to take care of them. Well I doubt that any of these particular students had let others manage their finances or their mothers care for their daily needs for quite some time. The inappropriateness of the representative's remarks clearly show his inability to recognize returning students as different from other more typical students.

If marketing departments or college representatives fail to recognize returning students as different from continuing students, do teachers, who arguably spend the most time and have the most influence with students, recognize them in their class policies and pedagogy? My undergraduate experience tells me that in general, no. This seems odd and unrealistic, particularly when considering the potential age discrepancy between the returning student and their teacher. Youngman in addresses this possible age difference: "Indeed, a significant number of these returning or first-time registrants are as old or older than the faculty with whom they come to study" (108). Could the teacher be addressing returning students older than herself like me when she explains the rules of the class: "No more than three absences. Bring a note from your doctor. There are no excuses for late papers." Does a man previously employed as a corporate manager not understand deadlines? Does a woman with two teenage children, a husband, and a part-time

job really need to ask her doctor for a note? Isn't the returning student's verbal reason for an absence good enough? I find myself wondering if this teacher's mother knows she's talking to us like this. Does a democratic classroom filled with adults of varying ages need reminding that they'll get in trouble if they violate the rules? Although in other circumstances I might find the assumption that I was eighteen flattering, in classrooms I find it disconcerting that teachers sometimes treat the entire class as age peers. My own experience as a teaching assistant affirms the need for clearly stated class policies, however part of me desires recognition that I may approach my education with a different level of life experience. Susan Miller in Textual Carnivals accurately describes the prevalent attitude toward students in general, "The student's imagined to be (and in participating in the [composition] course is generally *required* to be) a presexual, preeconomic, prepolitical person" (87). Perhaps teachers could examine this unspoken requirement to see if it informs their policies or pedagogy. Realistically speaking, this assumption probably does not apply to the majority of college students. However, it especially does not apply to mature returning college students who already have families, work, or vote. I do not wish to put forth a general assumption or unfair assessment of all teachers' practices, I can only relay my own experiences. I recognize that teachers cannot be categorized hegemonically regarding their policies or practices, but I want to point out that neither can students.

One way of recognizing returning students as sites of critical difference lies in the use of a pedagogical tool--the textbook. Textbooks often address the classroom as a homogeneous group. Essays in these textbooks employ language sensitive to age and gender issues, but fail to take into account age differences. At this point, I don't need to discuss specific textbooks, but the ubiquitous Toby Fulwiler essay "Freshmen Writing: It's the Best Course to Teach" comes to mind. Of course, many teachers and writing programs sensitive to the diversity of students develop their own materials. And textbooks continue to improve with regards to issues about difference. At the recent Conference on College Composition for Communication I located textbooks containing essays which discuss difference like Rose Hawkins and Robert Isaacson's Uncommon Knowledge, Wanda Schindley's The Informed Citizen, and the forthcoming Who Are

We? Readings in Identity, Community, Work, and Career. In particular, the essays, "Finding Oneself Through Work," "Chutes and (No) Ladders,", "Working in Dilbert's World," and "Dead-end Jobs: A Way Out" appear promising for use with returning students.

The differences between returning students and continuing students don't stop at photo layouts, orientations, classroom dynamics, or textbooks. The demands placed on students seems magnified for returning students who because of family commitments already balance their time and personal resources. Regarding this difference, Rosalind Edwards in Mature Women Students states, "Full-time mature women students are required to give as much commitment to study as bachelor boys at the same time as they are normatively required to give priority to their families" (63). Although I realized that studying, writing essays, and class projects would take up my time, neither my family not I did not realize to what extent these tasks would affect our lifestyle. In my situation, six years after returning to college, those close to me still struggle to recognize the restrictions placed on my time by my commitment to education. Part of the difficulty lies in the appearance of work. As we know, those outside of academia have difficulty viewing intellectual work as labor. As such, the requirements of performing intellectual labor frequently go unrecognized. I felt floored when a family member asked me why I couldn't just "read 'that' once and know it." The 'that' referred to an essay on literary theory. I tried to respond with a question and an analogy that would create some type of understanding of the degree of difficulty in performing intellectual work. I decided to relate the theoretical text to a document of some complexity--a contract, and began by saying, "this is what I'm reading" before reciting a particularly difficult passage. After the text produced the hoped for Socratic effect, I then asked, "would you sign a contract if you'd read it only once?". A single reading of a text, academic or otherwise, does not guarantee understanding. In fact, it would be foolish to sign a contract after reading it only once and before analyzing its legal and financial ramifications. It would also be foolish for me to think that I understood a literary theory text under the same conditions. Furthermore, I would like to posit that it is foolish for teachers, institutions, and students to not

acknowledge in their practices returning students, including the capabilities and life experiences that they bring to the classroom.

Returning students, women and men, not only walk a tightrope between family and academic demands, they may also balance work and employer expectations like plates on the end of long poles while doing so. Not all returning students attend school on a full-time basis. Some returning student's employers pay for their continuing education. Giczkowski also offers another realistic reason for teachers and administration to recognize in their pedagogy and policy the increasing numbers of returning students, "These students come back to full-time study having spent their formative years outside the academic world. They are used to dealing with personnel offices, business bureaucracies, neighborhood committees, and customer-service representatives" (B2). Even as returning students must adapt to the requirements of the academy, the academy must adapt to the significant number of returning students who use these skills to navigate its classrooms and administrative offices. And students who created lifestyles during their time away from the academy now learn to balance a tightrope stretched between family, employee, and academic obligations. Balancing this wobbly tightrope and satisfying their families, employers, professors, and themselves requires the development of coping skills. Unfortunately, some institutions still view the response to family needs or emergencies as unprofessional. Although this attitude varies from institutions to institution and professor to professor, a sick child does not qualify as an acceptable reason for missing a class or for receiving an extension on an assignment. At least, returning students may not feel comfortable with admitting that their absence or the completion of class requirements comes in second to their family's needs. This division between family needs, academic requirements causes consternation, especially to women students who, according to Rosaline Edwards ". . . must show that their educational work is not affected by their family commitments, and that their family lives are not suffering because of their studies" (Edwards 63). Strangely, this attitude of academic or corporate career over family creates an echo between two seemingly disparate worlds of the academy and the corporation.

Finally, this paper is not intended to be prescriptive. Friends or counselors who know an individual returning student's particular situation can probably offer better advice. But I do intend to raise questions and solicit ideas regarding the particular dilemma posed by returning students.

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